

“ROOM FOR YOU AND ME”: AN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF NONCANONICAL
LABOR LITERATURE

by

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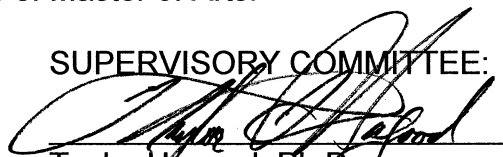
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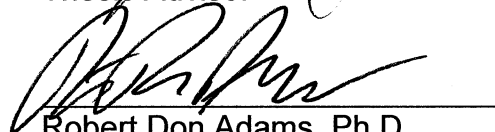
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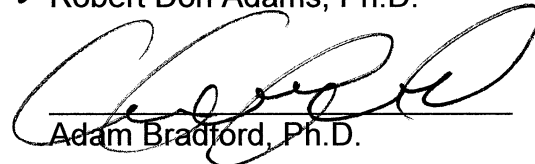
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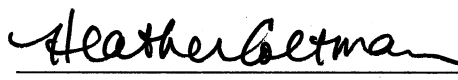
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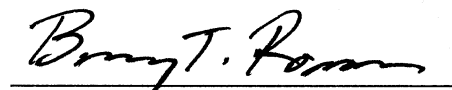

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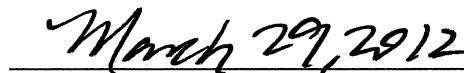

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ABSTRACT

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Labor literature is in popular and academic neglect. I argue that labor literature's neglect is unjust, and I provide a way of examining labor literature that can rescue it from neglect. I shall be concerned with labor literature's academic decline due to its apparent lack of value according to traditional standards of literary criticism. I will argue that ethical criticism—criticism of literature that considers the ethics of a work as a part of its literary value—can reveal new complexities in labor literature. An ethical critical analysis of the representation of American labor movements and workers in noncanonical texts will show the distinctive ethical value such texts hold. I will argue that labor texts possess ethical value insofar as they help readers develop awareness of complex ethical issues posed by labor and community, and that the ethical value of labor literature provides a new reason to value such works.

“ROOM FOR YOU AND ME”: AN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF NONCANONICAL
LABOR LITERATURE

Introduction	1
“Hearts Starve As Well As Bodies”: Community in Northern Towns.....	20
“Us Poor Folks Haven’t Got a Chance Unless We Organize”: Southern Labor Communities	35
“¡Trabajadores, Vamanos!”: Communities of Migrant Workers.....	52
Conclusion	66
Works Cited.....	70

I. INTRODUCTION

Labor literature is in popular and academic neglect in the United States. It is, according to Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy, “a world of writing...largely left out of the mainstream literary canon...hidden, forgotten, marginalized, or actively suppressed as political propaganda ... [and is] rooted outside the academy” (xix). Laura Hapke remarks on the difficulty in finding labor studies texts—much more so the American work novels so vital to labor studies—in a major bookstore in New York City. She notes that customers asking for the labor section are often directed to books on childbirth and comments on the placing of labor texts in a dark corner of the store. The texts sit on a shelf obscured by a display of computer games, a metaphor for labor’s place in the contemporary American mind, where work “occupies the slenderest of spaces” (3). Hapke laments the absence of the worker in literature being written and studied today, noting that “workers have all but vanished from the artistic landscape” (4). Absent are novels and stories that give voice to suffering workers. Hapke sees no writers providing a voice for the struggling workers of this generation. “Where are the bards?” (4), she queries. According to writer David Joseph, in an essay that chronicles his own struggles for acceptance as a working-class writer, the art and literature of the working class are ignored: “Jude remains obscure” (139).

My goals in this thesis are to argue that labor literature's neglect is unjust and to provide a way of examining labor literature that can rescue it from that neglect. While I shall in part discuss the wider social and cultural reasons for the neglect of labor literature, I shall mostly be concerned with labor literature's academic decline due to its apparent lack of value when judged with reference to traditional standards of literary criticism. What is traditionally considered literary is a consequence of a definition of literature as "well-written" texts (Coles and Zandy xxiii).¹ This narrow definition devalues labor literature, which is, according to Coles and Zandy, "subject to questions about literary quality and the limitations of writers' abilities" (xxiii). Labor literature might unjustly be seen as simple, as having straightforward meanings, and consequently as being of little or no traditional literary value. I will argue that ethical criticism—that is criticism of literature that considers the ethics of a work in its evaluation of the work's literary value—can reveal new complexities in labor literature that are otherwise hidden. Heretofore, scholars have applied ethical criticism to canonical literature.²

¹ Someone might object that this definition of literature is too limited. For example, Terry Eagleton gives a definition that is more fluid: literature is "any kind of writing which for some reason or another somebody values highly" (8). If one accepted that definition of literature, it would mean that no special defense of labor literature would be needed. Even on Eagleton's definition, however, there must be reasons to value a work before it counts as literature. I contend that ethical criticism can reveal new reasons to value labor literature highly, insofar as labor literature has a unique kind of cognitive, ethical content. Therefore, the arguments of this thesis are still needed, even given less restrictive definitions of literature than the one cited in the text to this note.

² For example, see in Plato's *Republic*, ethical criticism of Homer; in Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge*, ethical criticism of Henry James and Shakespeare; in Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*, ethical criticism of Jane Austen, D.H. Lawrence, and Mark Twain; and in the anthology *Art and Ethical Criticism*, Paisley Livingston's ethical criticism of Virginia Woolf and Robert C. Solomon's ethical criticism of Albert Camus.

However, existing methods of ethical criticism are inadequate to be applied to labor literature. With some theoretical revisions, an ethical critical analysis of the representation of 19th, 20th, and 21st American labor movements and workers in noncanonical texts will show the distinctive ethical value such texts hold. In particular, I will argue 1) that labor texts possess ethical value insofar as they can help readers develop their awareness of the complex ethical issues posed by labor and community and 2) that the ethical value of labor literature provides a new reason to value such works, thereby rescuing them from their unjust neglect.

To say that ethical criticism can rescue labor literature from unjust neglect by highlighting a side of labor literature ignored by traditional literary criticism is not to say that an ethical critical approach is the only approach suited to the study of labor literature. However, these other approaches are unsuited to the present thesis in other ways. There are some postmodernist approaches, such as deconstruction and poststructuralism, that are suspicious of drawing links between literature and the world, making them less theoretically suited to show the ethical value of labor literature. Other contemporary forms of literary criticism, though they might draw links between literature and the world, might “miss” the labor issues presented in a text. A feminist approach, for instance, might *inter alia* expose the ethical problematic posed by the situation of marginalized female workers. A postcolonial approach might highlight how a text reveals the ethical legacy of imperialism in a labor market. However, neither approach is equipped to deal systematically with labor issues. Such approaches are therefore not theoretically as well suited to show the ethical value of labor literature. Ethical

criticism, by contrast, is a “natural fit” for labor literature, since the writers of labor literature have a deep and direct engagement with ethical issues.

Before I elucidate the version of ethical criticism I shall apply to labor literature, I first want to set out the theoretical justification for the ethical criticism of art and discuss what might be lacking or problematic in more extreme approaches to ethical criticism.

Radical Moralism and Radical Autonomism

Perhaps the earliest ethical criticism is that of Plato’s *Republic*. Socrates tells Glaucon and Adeimantus that since children are young and impressionable, storytellers must be supervised: “Then we must first of all, it seems, supervise the storytellers. We’ll select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren’t” (377b). Socrates goes on to explain that the aesthetic qualities of which he speaks when he says “fine and beautiful” are not the form or structure of texts. Instead, Socrates argues that the fine and beautiful stories are those that are truthful about gods and parents. Any stories that dishonor gods or parents must be forbidden; otherwise, children will not honor either group nor learn to respect relationships (378c). For Plato and Socrates, in other words, aesthetic qualities are ethical qualities. However, Socrates goes further than simply advocating the instruction of nurses and mothers. Poets must also be censored, so that their stories represent both gods and families fairly and accurately. Poets are responsible for maintaining harmony in the republic by writing the truth, for “telling the greatest falsehood about the most important

things doesn't make a fine story" (378a). Beauty and fineness lie not in formal aesthetic aspects of narrative art, but instead in the moral truth of the narratives.

This early form of ethical criticism is what has come to be called radical moralism: it assigns art no value other than its ethical value. Radical moralism tells us that the central aim of art is to offer moral lessons (Beardsmore 1).

According to the philosopher R. W. Beardsmore, radical moralism stems from attempts to combat doubts about the importance of art. Such doubts lead people to locate the importance of art within the moral purpose the art serves (2). In other words, the radical moralist, as was just seen in the case of Plato, views art as instrumental. According to Sir Philip Sidney, "the final end is to lead and draw us to as high a perfection as our degenerate souls can be capable of" (quoted in Beardsmore 2). So, for radical moralists like Sidney, poetry's aim is to make humans morally good, and great poetry attains that end (3). Such intuitions about the value of art also inform the radical moralism of Leo Tolstoy. The purpose of art, for Tolstoy, is "to evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling" (Tolstoy 33). Art is "a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and humanity" (43). The radical moralist, according to Beardsmore, places the significance of art "in what it brings—rather than in what it is" (14).

The radical moralist approach contains an insight that is the seed of contemporary forms of ethical criticism. The virtue of the radical moralist thesis is its attempt to show us that art “can tell us something, can make a difference to our ideas of morality” (Beardsmore 15). The moralist thesis thus makes moves toward valuing the ethics of artworks. In doing so, however, it may also license condemning art that is deemed immoral, and in extreme cases, advocate for censorship of art deemed immoral. Historically, radical moralism has also been associated with puritanical or otherwise narrow systems of ethics. Radical moralism lends itself to such extremes because, as has been seen, it ignores those values of artworks that are not ethical values. Thus, though the insight that art can tell us something about our ethical lives will be useful, and indeed is part of contemporary ethical critical arguments, including Martha Nussbaum’s, the approach used to examine labor literature cannot be entirely radical moralist, but will instead be informed by radical moralism.

At the opposite end of the ethical critical spectrum, developed in reaction to radical moralism, is the radical autonomist approach. For the radical autonomist, art is isolated from the rest of life (Beardsmore 16). The autonomist thesis is suggested by Oscar Wilde’s famous statements in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all.” and “No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style” (17). So autonomism solves the problems (such as censorship) that are created when art is deemed to be a means to an end, but only at the expense of

ignoring the original insight of radical moralism—that art can have ethical aspects.³ But a radical autonomist also faces a more pressing immanent problem within his theory of art. Booth points out that Wilde is, in his preface to *Dorian Gray* and “The Decay of Lying,” himself doing ethical work by attempting to write something that will improve society (11-12).⁴ Vladimir Nabokov gives an alternative radical autonomist statement in his afterword to *Lolita*: “I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction...*Lolita* has no moral in tow. For me a work of fiction exists insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss” (315). Richard Posner, in the course of supporting radical autonomism, states that: “The aesthetic outlook is a moral outlook, one that stresses the values of openness, detachment, hedonism, curiosity, tolerance, the cultivation of the self, and the preservation of a private sphere—in short, the values of liberal

³ For more on radical autonomism, see Clive Bell’s “Significant Form” and Richard Posner’s “Against Ethical Criticism: Part One” and “Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two.”

⁴ It has been suggested to me by a reader that though Wilde’s statements appear to be those of a radical autonomist, they may not be a full characterization of Wilde’s position on art and ethics. Wilde was influenced by Spinoza, who gives a systematic basis for the thought that ethics and aesthetics are identical. In Spinoza’s metaphysics there is one God or nature, of which *all* other things are manifestations. In particular, perfect ethical action is perfect aesthetic action and vice versa. Living both aesthetically and ethically is a consequence of attaining what Spinoza calls the perfect state of understanding, which is intellectual love of God (or nature) (Cottingham 179). Wilde’s view is similar to Spinoza’s: he does care about ethics, in that he feels that a maximally aesthetic world would be a maximally ethical world (“Soul of Man” 1104). In practice, however, the Wilde/Spinoza approach would still only consider formal aesthetic qualities when evaluating literature. Since labor texts may not have the traditional aesthetic qualities required by Wilde/Spinoza, the approach would be unsuitable for the project of this thesis. Labor texts, not having been written under the ideal conditions necessary for maximal aesthetical value, cannot be critiqued purely on their formal aesthetic properties. Therefore, the Wilde/Spinoza position, like the radical autonomist position, is at least not suitable for the critical purposes of this thesis.

individualism” (2). Thus, even in its attempts to detach art from moral value, Posner concedes that radical autonomism presupposes ethical judgments. The radical autonomist attempt to divorce art from its connection to our ethical world cannot be sustained.

Given the problems of both radical moralism and radical autonomism, the mode of ethical criticism most fruitfully applied to labor literature is one that incorporates the basic insight of radical moralism—that art has ethical value—while avoiding the reduction of the value of art to only its ethical dimensions.

Moderate Moralism and Ethicism

While both the radical moralist approach and the radical autonomist approach contain valuable insights, internal problems in both approaches render them at least unsuitable for the study of labor literature. However, a moderate moralist approach avoids some of the problems created by radical moralism and radical autonomism while still utilizing some of the useful parts of the radical approaches. Radical moralism reduces the value of art to its moral value and may dismiss or censor art that is immoral, and radical autonomism denies that art can have any ethical aspects at all. Some contemporary ethical critics’ positions lie in the middle of these two extremes.⁵ The middle position, moderate moralism or ethicism, broadly describes the work of Martha Nussbaum, Berys Gaut, Noël Carroll, Wayne Booth, and David Davies. They argue that art has ethical

⁵ For more on moderate moralism/ethical criticism, see: Noël Carroll’s “Moderate Moralism” and “Moderate Moralism versus Moderate Autonomism,” and Oliver Connolly’s “Ethicism and Moderate Moralism.”

properties and can be judged in part based on those ethical properties. A representative statement of the moderate position is given by philosopher and ethical critic Noël Carroll: “Some works of art may be evaluated morally, and sometimes the moral defects and/or merits of a work of art may figure in the aesthetic evaluation of the work” (236). For Wayne Booth, one does not simply judge a work as ethically good or bad, and there are no simple, definitive ethical conclusions to be made. Unlike the pure instrumentalism of radical moralism, Booth’s ethical criticism is not concerned with the effects of a novel on a person’s moral character, but with the ethical quality of the experience of the narrative itself (4). And importantly, moderate ethical critics do not claim that art without any apparent ethical aspects holds no aesthetic value.

While Carroll, Booth, and Gaut put ethical criticism on a firm theoretical footing, Martha Nussbaum provides a more detailed and suggestive model of how ethical criticism might be applied to labor literature in practice. However, Nussbaum’s model, despite its richness, requires substantial revision to be suitable for critically analyzing labor literature. Since it is Nussbaum’s form of ethical criticism that provides the basis of the ethical critical approach I will apply in this thesis, I turn now to a detailed explanation of Nussbaum’s approach.

For Nussbaum, literature reveals truths that analytical philosophy cannot because of the abstract character of analytical argument. Readers might agree with an analytical argument, for example, but they will not be moved by the argument in the way that literature can move them. There are moral lessons about love in romantic relationships, amongst friends, and within families that

cannot be fully and sufficiently realized in the language of standard philosophical prose, the usual means of expression for ethical work. There is a need for “a language that is more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars...[for]...certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms of the narrative artist” (3-4). Nussbaum thus sees literature as being able to do what might be thought of as “ethical work,” the work of moving readers toward ethical sympathy through the complex emotional-cognitive process that is engaging with literature. For Nussbaum, literature creates an awareness in readers, and not just an awareness, but an ethical awareness.⁶

How then does Nussbaum’s approach fit in the larger picture of ethical criticism outlined above? Nussbaum’s approach, in one way, represents a departure from radical moralism. She does not suggest that basing the literary value of a work on its ethics is appropriate for all literature because she does not think that all works of art have ethical value (149); those works without ethical value can still have literary value. However, Nussbaum’s approach is still troublingly similar to the radical moralist position insofar as it considers ethical content to be the highest value of a work of literature. For Nussbaum, all things are subservient to the ethical task as she views the ultimate task of the literary artist to be an ethical one (148).

⁶ Throughout this thesis, when I refer to readers of or characters in literature being “aware,” I shall mean this type of ethical awareness.

So what is Nussbaum's account of the ethical value of a literary work? Again, unlike the radical moralists, Nussbaum does not suggest that literature has value insofar as it conforms to any specific code of ethics. Rather, the ethical work done by novels is a more general kind of *cognitive* work. Literature does cognitive ethical work by engaging the moral imagination of its readers, exposing ethical issues of which readers may not have been aware and allowing people to achieve a deeper intellectual engagement with those issues. Thus her approach is not tied to, nor premised upon, any substantive system of ethics, and indeed does not require literature to prescribe ethical conclusions.

Let us consider, in some detail, an example of the kind of cognitive work Nussbaum sees a novel as performing: her analysis in *Love's Knowledge* of a father-daughter relationship in Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*. The daughter has reached an age where she must leave her father to live with her husband, but she must do so without abandoning her father. In turn, the father must learn to let his daughter go. They are, according to Nussbaum, "learning to give each other up" (151). James' portrayal of that complex process is for Nussbaum a paradigmatic example of a novel's potential for ethical work. Some might immediately object that be it that James' characters' situation is an emotional dilemma, it is not an ethical dilemma. Nussbaum argues otherwise. The girl's feelings are more than girlish fear, and the father is more than merely emotional about his daughter leaving. The two are in "moral anguish" (150). Were either father or daughter to act clumsily or insensitively toward each other, they would be guilty of a real moral failure. For example, the father deeply values the

relationship with his daughter. Thus, if she were to hurt her father emotionally at this time, she would be acting unethically, just as if she were to strike him physically. Clearly in this situation, ethical excellence requires creativity and improvisation and a kind of artistry, since there can be no generally applicable ethical rules to prescribe the correct course of action in their delicate situation. Insofar as James' novel succeeds in portraying such improvisation, Nussbaum sees literature as doing cognitive ethical work by showing two people performing "acts of altruism without reliance on duty, improvising what is required" (149).

The reason this sort of interpersonal level ethical work is uniquely done by literature, according to Nussbaum, is because of literature's attention to particulars. In some literature, every detail of intimate, personal relationships is immediately available in the text. For instance, the crowning ethical achievement of *The Golden Bowl*, according to Nussbaum, comes not in an interpersonal act but in a moment of inspired ethical vision. The father imagines his daughter as a sea creature swimming freely in the ocean (representative of her sexuality). She is buoyant, not sinking and not drowning, and the father has no desire to pull her under. Through the image, the father recognizes that his daughter is a sexual being, one who is free and floating in her sexuality and enjoying its rapture. Furthermore, since the father realizes that he has no desire to pull his daughter under, the reader sees, according to Nussbaum, the father acknowledge "his daughter's sexuality and free maturity." Since James does not directly say, "And so the father realized his daughter had become a sexual being," it is up to the reader to examine and interpret the image. According to Nussbaum, a

paraphrase or a simple statement that told the reader that the father accepted his daughter's sexuality would not engage the reader's moral imagination in the same way as the image (152). Nussbaum is describing a unique kind of ethical work being done by literature through the force of its imagery and its engagement of readers' moral imaginations. Readers are engaged to think about ethical issues in a new way, not through prescribed rules of moral conduct, but through observation of improvised moral behavior. In a similar vein, R.W. Beardsmore writes that what makes the ethical work done by literature unique is that the reader engages with ethical issues by "seeing the force of particular words used—substituting or paraphrasing will not do" (55). Readers' imaginations can be engaged, not through prescriptions or propositions, but through experiencing the lives of characters and the force of words and imagery in literature.

There is then a kind of ethical work uniquely done by literature. First, literature shows ethical issues that may not at first even seem to be ethical issues. In this regard, it is important to note that Nussbaum uses the term "ethics" in a classical way: any issue that is about "living well" is deemed an ethical issue. Wayne Booth offers a similar explanation of the use of the word "ethics" in ethical criticism. Ethics is not used to mean a limited range of moral standards, like honesty or decency, and it is not meant to represent an approved range of choices. Ethics is construed more broadly as the entirety of one's disposition toward and interaction with the world. Second, the distinctive style and attention to particulars in literature cannot be found in moral philosophy. The reason this ethical work is unique to literature is because of the detail involved, psychological

minutiae that could not possibly be included in an analytical philosophical treatise.⁷

Nussbaum's approach allows for the ethical work done by labor literature to be considered as part of its literary value, thereby addressing problems created by radical autonomism. Her approach also avoids the extremist tendencies of radical moralism by allowing ethical value to be part, but not all, of the literary value of a work. I shall show in the subsequent chapters that labor literature, despite its many dissimilarities from James' prose, is also capable of performing important cognitive ethical work. Thus, Nussbaum's approach serves as the theoretical basis of my defense of the value of labor literature; however, it must first be revised in four important ways.

Nussbaum and I are dealing with two different kinds of ethics. Nussbaum, who is strongly influenced by classical thought, is primarily concerned with personal ethics. The labor literature I shall examine deals with the community ethics that emerge from industrial and post-industrial societies.⁸ These two kinds

⁷ David Davies makes a similar point about this unique ability of literature in *Aesthetics & Literature*: "The abundance of psychological and situational detail contained in novels ... would be inappropriate or even impossible with the confines of a philosophical text" (169).

⁸ It is necessary here to acknowledge the affinities of Marxist thought with the ethics of labor communities and unions. Marx and Engels claimed that the victory of workers depended on "the ever growing unity of the workers" (132). Thus for Marx and Engels, community is an important part of socialism. Classical Marxism states that the logic of capitalism makes socialist community historically inevitable. We do not have to worry if community is morally legitimate or worth pursuing. This thesis will not, however, presume the truth of Classical Marxism. Instead, I align myself with the so-called Analytical Marxists (such as G.A. Cohen), who argue that "if socialist ideals are to be implemented, it will require persuading people that these ideals are morally legitimate and worth pursuing" (Kymlicka 167). The subsequent chapters of this thesis fulfill that

of ethics are both historically and theoretically dissimilar. In texts considered by Nussbaum, all the details relevant to an interpersonal ethical dilemma are “right there” in the text: the particulars, the revelations of the psyches of the characters, the images that are prominent and vivid. In texts dealing with community ethics, the critic has to do a great deal more work to reveal the community ethics at play. For example, in *The Celestial Jukebox*, a scene between Angus and Consuela might seem at first to be nothing more than a conversation between two persons, a storeowner and the employee with whom he is smitten. However, a close examination of the relationship and conversation reveal that the ethical dimensions of their interaction extend beyond the two people to their relationships to their wider labor and political communities. The image of a statue in *Life in the Iron Mills* must be examined closely to see what it reveals about the spiritual conditions of the workers in the iron mill town. This revision to Nussbaum bears some resemblance to a remark of the philosopher David Davies, who argues that the ethical work done by literature is unique, as it invites readers to “fill in the gaps” in a narrative to discern the ethical message instead of making prescriptions or proclamations (172). The kind of ethical work done by labor literature requires that readers and critics fill in those gaps. The critic of labor literature must seek out and then examine the particulars of the suprapersonal ethical dilemmas, which cannot be represented as directly nor in

task—showing that community, a socialist ideal, is morally legitimate and worth pursuing. Thus, this thesis is of interest not only to those Marxists who think community is valuable, but also to anyone who values community.

as much detail as the interpersonal-level ethical dilemmas studied by Martha Nussbaum in the literature of Henry James.

My work does more than simply extend Nussbaum into new area of ethics, because being aware of community ethics can complicate interpersonal-level ethics, thus complicating Nussbaum's argument. Nussbaum's ethical literary criticism can sometimes paint too rosy a picture. Characters are able to improvise ethical behavior, and their finer awareness unproblematically produces more richly responsible action. The characters' lives become richer as a result of their negotiations with personal ethics. However, interpersonal level ethics conflict with suprapersonal ethics, since acting ethically with regard to one's community can result in acting unethically on a personal level. Finer ethical awareness of community can bring with it new ethical difficulties. For example, in *God's Little Acre*, by acting ethically toward his community, Will Thompson leaves his wife a widow. Thus, my thesis is no trivial consequence of Nussbaum's position. For if a decision will, no matter what, end with negative ethical consequences, there will be "moral residue." Labor literature depicts people faced with ethical dilemmas that have no clear ethical outcome, ethical dilemmas that will always result in moral residue. My discussion of labor literature suggests that there is an unwarranted optimism in Nussbaum's views of the possibilities of ethical criticism.

Though Nussbaum considers the novel to be a paradigm of *moral* activity, what she does not consider is that cognitive ethical work can also be done through depictions of *immoral* activity. My method diverges from Nussbaum's by

examining moral failings as well as achievements. This thesis will examine not only ethical achievements in recognizing inequality and valuing community, but also ethical failures. I shall argue that literature, in providing examples of unethical behavior in labor communities, as well as providing models of ethical behavior, does another unique, literary kind of ethical work. Nussbaum might decry the way that a text depicts ethical coarseness, but I shall show that even in those moments, labor literature is doing ethical work. Though the novel may be a “paradigm” of moral activity, cognitive ethical work can also be done in labor literature by depicting the damaging effects of acts that are unethical from the point of view of community. For example, Ty Ty in *God’s Little Acre* mistreats and exploits the community of workers on his farm with devastating effects on norms of community.

Nussbaum’s approach, though it is in some ways moderate, is still too radical for an examination of labor literature. For Nussbaum, ethics still subsumes aesthetics, and the highest task of the literary artist is the ethical one. Clearly, only some novels will be fit for Nussbaum’s view of literature’s moral task. Since I appeal to ethical criticism only to help rescue neglected literature, I am not suggesting that ethical value is the only value a work can have, nor am I advocating the neglect of literature that is not ethically valuable. Instead, I adopt a more measured approach, adapted from Berys Gaut. Gaut affirms the basic ethical critical thesis about literature. One of the components necessary to evaluate the aesthetics of a work of art is the way that ethics and morals are manifested in the art. An artwork’s ethics is a part of its aesthetic value: a work

can be aesthetically good if it exhibits ethically commendable qualities and aesthetically defective if it exhibits ethically reprehensible qualities. The manifestation of ethically commendable attitudes can count towards aesthetic merit, and ethically reprehensible attitudes can count against aesthetic merit. That is, Gaut's argument is *pro tanto*, in that a work of art can be aesthetically good, and even great, even if it is ethically flawed, and a work cannot be considered aesthetically good simply because it manifests ethically good qualities. Stated another way, a work of art can be aesthetically good because of formal unification and expression but aesthetically bad because it trivializes the ethical issues with which it deals or manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes. In the end, the ethical critic must make an "all-things-considered judgment" balancing aesthetic merits and demerits against each other to determine whether a work is "all-things-considered" good (Gaut 356). Importing Gaut's *pro tanto* modification is crucial to employing ethical criticism in the exploration of ethical issues in otherwise ignored or unexamined labor texts. Thus I shall augment Nussbaum's approach with the *pro tanto* qualification. Therefore, I can consistently accept that even simple escapist fiction, for example, might have some literary value but still claim that labor literature has a distinctive literary value that is a result of its ethical value.

With those four points of revision, an ethical critique of labor literature can be effected. Following Nussbaum's suggestion that literature be read in conjunction with philosophy to make ethical inquiry complete, this thesis will show how literature can be read in conjunction with philosophical work to

elucidate the ethics of community in labor movements. Thus my thesis shows how labor literature has implications for moral philosophy. The definition of community that I shall rely on in this thesis is advanced by G. A. Cohen. In *Why Not Socialism?* Cohen claims that community is necessary for “human relationships to take a desirable form” (39). The present dominant form of economic reciprocity is founded on self-interest. We serve others only because we can desire something in return, and they have some need or want of the good or services we are offering. That kind of market reciprocity is motivated by fear and greed. In building community, on the other hand, people must achieve reciprocity through mutual caring. In what Cohen terms “communal reciprocity,” we are committed to serving fellow human beings. We have a desire to serve them and to be served by them, and there is satisfaction on each side of the transaction (39-40). This thesis will scrutinize the various manifestations of such a norm of community in various labor texts, and will thereby make more complete an understanding of the ethics of community.

Thus, this thesis provides a new route to understanding the literary value of labor literature. It will prove that labor literature does ethical work of a unique kind—that it does cognitive ethical work—not through proclamations or prescriptions, but by engaging readers to develop a deep understanding of community ethics and the inequalities faced by workers. Using a neglected form of literary criticism, the rescue of a neglected form of literature can be effected.

II. "HEARTS STARVE AS WELL AS BODIES": COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN TOWNS

According to historian Laura Browder, 19th century Americans of all classes were reading more as literacy rates were rising. Furthermore, as readers were open to political messages, left-wing and socialist writers at this time had a receptive audience who were often called into action through reading (Browder 14). One particularly illuminating work from this time period is *Life in the Iron Mills*, a novella by Rebecca Harding Davis. The novella creates an awareness of the ethical problem of inequality in the living and working conditions of mill workers in northern towns. This awareness is strikingly lacking in other contemporary mill-town writing, which I will contrast with Davis' novella.

In her introduction to the Bedford Critical Edition of *Life in the Iron Mills*, Cecelia Tichi argues that Davis wrote a realist novella about life in an iron-mill city that was different from that of travel writers, such as Willard Glazier, who glorified living conditions in iron-mill towns in his book *Peculiarities of American Cities*. In addition to the writers Tichi discusses, similar writing appeared in *The Lowell Offering*, a monthly periodical of writing by the young female textile workers known as the Lowell Mill Girls, which also downplayed the severity of working conditions in the mill town. While such writers often glorified the cities and the living and working conditions of the workers, Davis gives realist

descriptions of the pollution and squalor of cities and of workers' physical and spiritual suffering. I will argue that Davis' novella does ethical work not only by making a reader aware of inequality, but by showing the inadequacy of other representations of mill and factory town life.

The ethical work of Davis' novella consists of making the reader finely aware of the particular conditions of an iron-mill town: the dirt, the grime, and the appalling living and working conditions. Her description of the town stands in stark contrast to Willard Glazier's travel writing and the writing in the *Lowell Mill Offering*, which glorified and idealized life in industrial towns. Furthermore, Davis' creation of such awareness is uniquely literary. By putting the reader into the mind of the characters, making them not just aware, but finely aware, seeing the town as the narrator does, in all its particulars and nuances, the haggard, sick faces of the workers, the dirt and grime that cover the town, the moldy, damp living quarters, Davis obliges the reader to take up the point of view of the characters. The reader thereby becomes more like "a person on whom nothing is lost" (Nussbaum 338) by seeing the mill-town through the eyes of the observant narrator, who is, throughout the novel, guiding readers to see the ethical reality of life in an iron-mill town. Therefore, Davis' text fulfills Nussbaum's condition for ethical merit, though in a different way from what Nussbaum countenances.

To illustrate Davis' ethical achievement, compare travel writer Willard Glazier's description of the iron mill city Pittsburgh to that of Davis' mill-town. Both writers directly address their audiences in second person and imperative sentences, inviting the reader to examine the cities—yet each are entreating

readers to pay attention to very different facets of iron cities. Glazier does not claim that Pittsburgh is a beautiful city; however, he does venerate and mythologize it as a great center of industrialization. Glazier directs readers to “by all means” make their first approach to Pittsburg⁹ by night, so they may “behold a spectacle which is not paralleled on this continent. Darkness gives the city and its surroundings a picturesqueness, which they wholly lack by daylight. It lies low down in a hollow of encompassing hills, gleaming with a thousand points of light, which are reflected from the rivers” (39). Glazier mystifies the industrial city, describing it in shimmering terms, full of the brightness and sparkle of industry. This description is in every respect different from the one given by the narrator of *Life in the Irons Mills*, who describes a mill-town after asking readers to imagine how a cloudy day looks in a town of iron-works. The sky is “muddy, flat, immoveable,” the air “thick, clammy, with the breath of human beings.” However, the distinguishing characteristic, the “idiosyncrasy of the town,” is the smoke. There is “smoke on the wharves, smoke on the dingy boats, on the yellow river—clinging in a coating of greasy soot to the house-front, the two faded poplars, the faces of the passers-by” (39). Particularly striking are two things that could be beautiful. There is a statue of an angel, no longer beautiful because it is covered in soot, and a canary, which no longer sings. Even beautiful things, that is, become dark and dirty when exposed to the iron-mill town. In Glazier’s Pittsburg,

⁹ Pittsburgh, though spelled with the “h” at the end when it was officially named, was briefly known as Pittsburg from 1890-1911 after a declaration by the United States Board on Geographic Names. A public campaign resulted in the restoration of the “h” in 1911.

“the tranquil Monongahela comes up from the south, alive with barges and tug boats” (71). By contrast, the mill-town’s river is “dull and tawny-colored (*la bella riviere!*)” and “drags itself sluggishly along, tired of the heavy weight of boats and coal barges” (40). The Monongahela is alive with the activity of an industrial town while the river in the iron mill town, ironically referred to as *la bella riviere*, is imagined as dirty and weary of the industrial activity. Davis thus exposes the reader to an alternative view of industrial cities, a prelude to doing the ethical work of making the reader aware of the living conditions in iron-mill cities.

Glazier goes on to caution the reader against being fooled by the image of the factories and mills in Pittsburg with their fires and heavy smoke. The fires may make the city appear to be “the great furnace of Pandemonium,” yet Glazier warns the image is an illusion. What the viewer is seeing is “the domain of Vulcan, not of Pluto.” The god of productive fire has left his ancient home in Olympus to come forge iron in Pittsburg, and the fires do not signify hell, but a “gigantic workshop.” Davis, conversely, likens the mill-town directly to Hell: Pluto dominates, not Vulcan. The mill-town is a “city of fires, that burned hot and fiercely in the night” (44). The street is like “a street In Hell” (45). The narrator notes that Deborah is aware that the street “looks like t’ Devils’ Place” and agrees that it does “in more way than one” (45). Moreover, a capitalist touring the mill where Hugh Wolfe works tells the mill-owner Kirby that the works looks like Dante’s Inferno, and the owner agrees: “Yes. Yonder is Farinata himself in the burning tomb” (50). Thus, Davis offers the readers an alternative image of iron-mill towns to Glazier’s mythologized workshop.

Glazier idealizes even the pollution in industrial cities. He contends that the smoke in Pittsburg, with its “carbon, sulfur, and iodine” is highly favorable to those with various illnesses, and that smoke and its chemicals are “the sure death of malaria and its attendant fevers.” Pittsburg is one of the healthiest cities in the United States. Furthermore, the city’s inhabitants are too concerned with work to worry about the inconvenience or ugliness of the smoke (46).

It is important to note here, too, that Glazier is not the only writer who proffers a positive account of the health of workers in factory and mill-towns. A writer for *The Lowell Offering*, in an editorial responding to inquiries about the health of workers in the Lowell mills, offers a similarly positive account to Glazier’s: there is no cause for alarm concerning the health of the women working in the textile factories in Lowell. “We believe there is as much good health here as in any place with the same population” (191). Though the writer admits the conditions are unfavorable for health—the workers are confined for twelve hours per day, and the rooms are confining, with poor air circulation that causes “a moist unpleasant body” for the workers—the writer insists these conditions are not unique to the textile mills in Lowell but are the working conditions for many workers in New England (191). So these workers are no less healthy than any others in New England. Any illnesses that do exist are proportionate to the population, and in fact, the workers themselves may be to blame. For the women are careless, wearing the same light coat in both winter and summer, no matter the temperature, and they do not take care to use umbrellas and over-shoes in rainy weather—though the writer does not consider

that women might not be able to afford heavier winter coats, umbrellas, and over-shoes. Furthermore, the writer suggests, the women busy themselves too much outside of work: knitting, attending to housework, and going to church. The writer does not consider that these are *responsibilities* that women have outside of work, but rather considers the activities “moderate amusements and pleasure” (192). However, women were obliged to attend to housework, and many boarding house rules demanded that workers go to church on Sundays. A reader who encountered only the *Lowell Offering* (or indeed the Glazier) description of the textile mill could conclude that no ethical dilemma or inequality existed, as workers were generally in good health and any in poor health had only themselves to blame. Davis, however, leads the reader to different ethical reasoning.

For Davis uncovers a different reality, alien to the workers of the *Lowell Mill Offering*. The workers in Davis’ mill-town are indeed affected physically by their living and working conditions. Deborah’s uncle, Hugh’s father, is pale and meek, with a white face and red eyes. Deborah looks “even more ghastly” with blue lips and watery eyes. The young girl Janey has a haggard and tired face, with eyes that are heavy with sleep and hunger (44). Hugh Wolfe, too, has “lost the strength and vigor of a man, his muscles were thin, his nerves weak, his face (a meek, woman’s face) haggard, yellow with consumption” (47), in a clear contradiction of Glazier’s contention that smoke and pollution help workers stay healthy.

Furthermore, Glazier and the *Lowell Mill Offering* writer romanticize the long workdays. According to Glazier, for the workers in Pittsburg, “work is the object of life.” They “occupy themselves from morning until night, from cradle to grave, only on Sundays, when, for the most part, the furnaces are idle” (334). Men work until death and die “with the harness on” (335). The lack of parks in Pittsburg can even be attributed to the busyness of the workers, who have no time for such leisure (338). The *Lowell Mill Offering* writer claims that the women are accustomed to working long hours and may even be working fewer hours in the mill than they would had they remained in the country on family farms. The writer goes so far as to claim that the regularity of the hours may be good for the workers, for they sleep, rise, and eat at regular hours and consistently get fresh air walking to and from the mill (192). Again, the reader of Glazier and the *Lowell Mill Offering* could conclude that no ethical problems in the treatment of workers existed in mill-towns.

The reader of Davis is, however, forcibly made aware of the negative effects of the long hours on workers in a mill-town. Deborah, for example, clearly suffers from the long hours she works at the mill. After a twelve-hour work day, “stupid with sleep” (46), with her back sore from standing at the spools, her teeth chattering, and her clothes soaked with rain, Deborah must walk miles to bring Hugh his dinner. The iron mill workers, too, toil endlessly as the mills run night and day, the engines unsleeping. The mill is closed only for a day in the week, but at midnight on Monday, the “great furnaces break forth with renewed fury” (45).

So far I have concentrated on a direct kind of ethical work performed by Davis—the attention she draws to otherwise hidden inequality. However, the ethical work she does is not exhausted simply by calling readers’ attention to the existence of inequality. The ethical problems of *Inequality* are revealed not just in the descriptions of an iron mill town that Davis offers in great contrast with other narratives of the time, but in Davis’ close attention to the particulars of life in mill-towns. Workers’ living conditions are unsuitable. Deborah, Hugh, and Hugh’s father live in a dark basement. It is “low [and] damp” with an “earthen floor covered with a green, slimy moss” and “a fetid air smothering the breath” (43). The narrator notes it is easy to see that Deborah is hungry as she sits down to her meager dinner of cold boiled potatoes for dinner—the first food she has had in fifteen hours (43). Davis displays ethically relevant conditions that were hidden by Glazier and *The Lowell Mill Offering*.

Given that Davis’ writing is clearly doing ethical work, what is the literary value of such ethical work? Seen through the critical lens developed in the introduction to this thesis, the literary value lies in the complex way the inequalities faced by the workers and the consequent necessity of community are revealed by Davis. As we have seen above, while Davis does often offer what seem to be more prescriptive moral lessons by directing the reader to examine specific facets of life in the mill-town, other inequalities are revealed more subtly. The reader of Davis’ novella thereby has her moral imagination engaged as she is invited by Davis to “fill in the gaps” in the narrative.

Consider the way that Davis reveals that the workers are not only suffering physically from hunger, but psychically from a spiritual hunger. *Life in the Iron Mills* sees ethical problems not only in the physical conditions of work and in the physical toil and its effects on the human body, but displays, too, an awareness of the spiritual harm done to workers such as Hugh Wolfe. However, this spiritual starvation is not overtly proclaimed in the text, and therefore there is no prescribed response for the reader to adopt. While a philosophical treatise might directly argue that workers are spiritually starved, Davis allows the reader to discern it for herself. The narrator tells the reader that there is a reality of “soul-starvation” in the people in the town, but the narrator can paint nothing of it herself. The narrator can only offer an outline, but it is up to the readers to read the “muddy depth of soul-history that lurked beneath” (47). It is the complexity of Davis’ moves in revealing the spiritual starvation and the ethical coarseness of the capitalists in devaluing community that makes this ethical work count toward literary value. The spiritual hunger is revealed slowly. The doctor and Mitchell work through discerning the meaning of the sculpture, much in the way that readers work through the sculpture and text’s ethical valiances. The doctor and Mitchell’s moral imaginations are engaged, just as the reader’s moral imagination is engaged, and the spiritual starvation of the workers is revealed to the reader in a nuanced, complex way.

Literary value lies in the understated way that the ethical failings of the mill tourists are revealed vis-à-vis community. The starvation is revealed, for example, in a figure sculpted by Hugh Wolfe in the mill. A reader works through

the dilemma presented to her, moral imagination engaged, as the spiritual starvation of the workers is revealed in the symbolic meaning of female figure at the same time as the characters are themselves discerning the meaning of the figure. The reader becomes aware of and understands the associated ethical dilemma through seeing the cognitive processes of the mill's tourists. Mitchell, the most perceptive of the three men touring the mill, notices the figure's "powerful limbs instinct with some poignant longing" and "clutching hands, the wild, eager face, like that of a starving wolf's" (53). Doctor May points to the hands on the sculpture, recognizing a longing, "groping, —do you see?— clutching: the peculiar action of a man dying of thirst" (53). As May continues to gaze at the sculpture, he realizes that it is not hunger, nor is it thirst, he is seeing. He asks Hugh what the sculpture means. "She be hungry," Hugh replies (53). To May, the body looks too strong to be starving, and Wolfe tells the doctor that she is not hungry for meat, but for "something to make her live, I think, —like you" (54). Thus the reader, along with the characters, discerns the meaning of the sculpture. Awareness is created not through a proclamation that might be found in a philosophical treatise, but through a subtle revelation. Hugh's sculpture thus creates an awareness of another kind of inequality faced by workers. The workers are not only physically starved but emotionally and spiritually starved. As the tourists begin to recognize the starvation, so too does the reader.

The parallel between Doctor May's and the reader's slow revelations through close examination and discernment of meanings models the ethical value of literature and the central argument of this thesis—the narrative imploring

of the reader to look more deeply into the hidden ethical messages that art can hold. Art can reveal, though subtly, truths about the human condition of workers—in fact, the scene is a model of moderate-moralist ethical criticism of literature. As the mill tourists go through an ethical process to become more finely aware, the reader concomitantly experiences the same process and through it becomes more finely aware herself.

Therein lies the uniquely literary value of the ethical work done by *Life in the Iron Mills*—the complex way the ethical dilemma is revealed to the reader, a complexity manifested in the sculpture itself. Mitchell sees, for instance, “not one line of beauty of grace” (53) in the sculpture but is still touched by it. He is impressed with the skills of the sculptor, with the lines and details, but what seems to really impress him, what makes the sculpture so important, so powerful, is what it reveals about the condition of subject and sculptor. Mitchell thus attends to the form of the sculpture but also attends to the hidden ethical meaning of the subject of the sculpture. The revelations are ethical but subtle and complex. For Mitchell, the ethical revelations of the sculpture count toward its aesthetic value. Likewise, attention to form exists in Davis’ novella, but the subtle power of the images, the complex way the ethical dilemmas are revealed is what counts toward the distinctively ethical dimensions of the literary value of the work.

As well as deep explorations of the ethics of inequality, Davis reveals a distinct ethical norm to the reader of *Life in the Iron Mills*—a norm of communal reciprocity. Deborah is committed to helping Hugh. She sacrifices herself by

stealing money to give to him when she sees that this is what will rescue him from his spiritual starvation. For “money ull do it”; with money “Hugh could walk there like a king” (60). Hugh then sacrifices himself for Deborah when he is caught with the money, taking the blame and the sentence of nineteen years in the penitentiary. After Hugh commits suicide, Deborah remains devoted, begging a Quaker woman to bury him not “in t’ townyard under t’ mud and ash where he will be smothered,” but out where Hugh was born, “on t’ lane moor, where t’air is frick and strong” (72). The Quaker woman promises to bury Hugh in the countryside. Deborah and Hugh remain committed to communal reciprocity—valuing each other for the sake of each other—even in death. The commitment to community is not selfish and not easy. There can be no prescribed response here as there is an inescapable moral residue—no matter what choice the characters make in regards to community, there is some negative moral outcome. By choosing to protect Deb, Hugh is imprisoned and driven to suicide. There is moral residue because Hugh’s suicide is a result of his commitment to community. Yet even with the moral residue and the lack of a clear, prescribed ethical directive in the text, the reader is still lead to see the importance of community.

What is it that the men touring the mill feel about community? After the three have discerned the meaning of the sculpture, they are now aware, even finely aware, of the particular starvation faced by the workers. Are they, though, richly responsible? These men, who are unwilling to help the workers, abdicate themselves of responsibility to the community. Again, as was seen earlier

apropos of spiritual starvation, this abdication is not directly referenced, but instead slowly revealed through the actions and speech of the three men on their mill tour.

The mill owner, Kirby, denies any responsibility for the living and working conditions of the workers: “I wash my hands of all social problems ... My duty to my operatives has a narrow limit—the pay-hour on Saturday night” (55). Kirby’s values are based on what Cohen terms market reciprocity: the workers provide Kirby a service, and he pays them in return. There is no communal reciprocity in the exchange because Kirby is motivated only by greed and not by a desire to serve his fellow human beings. Indeed, Kirby further denies any responsibility for the souls of the workers: “What has the man who pays them money to do with their souls’ concern, more than the grocer or butcher who takes it?” (55). Thus, the reader sees Kirby as having a limited kind of responsibility, which disavows important aspects of ethical norms of community.

May’s gestures toward community, too, are empty. He feels that what will help Wolfe is “a friendly word or two,” that Wolfe is “a latent genius to be warmed into life by a waited-for sunbeam” (56). The doctor is thus sympathetic but unwilling to help. He is what Nussbaum might characterize as aware on one level but not richly responsible. When Hugh, as a representative of the community of workers, directly asks the doctor for help, he refuses. Thus the doctor, though perhaps aware in a limited way, is neither finely aware nor richly responsible.

The absence of fine awareness cannot be attributed, however, to Mitchell’s more nuanced ethical understanding. Again, Mitchell appears to be

aware on one level. He has an artistic sense that makes him more perceptive than May or Kirby. He is refined and well-read, particularly in philosophy. However, what is subtly shown is the way in which Mitchell lacks complete ethical awareness. Though Mitchell has read philosophy, he “sucked the life out of it in an indifferent, gentlemanly way” (51). He applies philosophy in the same way, indifferently and literally, never seeing beyond what he prephilosophically likes and dislikes. He sees ethics as applying to other people, being quick to point out that Kirby and the doctor should be helping the workers. He is aware of the particulars of the situation, the physical and spiritual, but is not finely aware, as he cannot see, or perhaps refuses to acknowledge, his own duty in supporting and helping the community. This lack of awareness prevents Mitchell from becoming responsible, much less richly responsible. Thus Mitchell, again backed by his own a la carte version of philosophy, is happy to remind Kirby and May that they have a responsibility to help the workers, but refuses to recognize his own responsibility. When confronted by May and told to teach and help the workers, Mitchell claims he can be of no use, for “I am not one of them” (57). Mitchell goes on to explain that “reform is born of need, not pity. No vital movement of the people’s has worked down, for good or evil; fermented, instead, carrying up the heaving, clogging mass” (57). Subverting his education and his refinement, Mitchell wriggles his way out of an ethical dilemma, excusing himself from any responsibility to the workers, leaving the responsibility instead, though he knows the workers are weak and ill, to the one person who will rise up from the workers to be “their own light-bringer—their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their

Messiah" (58). *Life in the Iron Mills* powerfully exposes the ethical failures of the capitalist in the industrialized town—sympathetic but unwilling to help, aware, yet not finely aware or richly responsible.

The final acts of the three mill tourists as they leave the mill symbolize their ethical behavior thus far—their denial of responsibility to the community of workers. Kirby tosses money at Deborah, his only responsibility to the workers a financial one; Doctor May offers nothing than more empty platitudes to Wolfe; and Mitchell tips his hat to Wolfe, symbolically acknowledging him as an equal and recognizing his suffering but still offering no help. Thus the reader sees the mill tourists have no deep commitment to community. In each case, they are either not finely aware or are unwilling to take the crucial step to being richly responsible. The reader observes, through a narrative work of literature and not a philosophical treatise, the ethical necessity of becoming finely aware and richly responsible to community.

III. "US POOR FOLKS HAVEN'T GOT A CHANCE UNLESS WE ORGANIZE": SOUTHERN LABOR COMMUNITIES

It was argued in Chapter Two that *Life in the Iron Mills* engaged the reader's moral imagination to make her more finely aware. The texts considered in this chapter do similar ethical work in exposing new aspects of the inequalities faced by workers. However, the complexities these texts expose differ again from those earlier discussed. The workers in these texts uniquely value community, even when torn between personal needs and community obligations. Furthermore, the texts in this chapter show characters engaging deeply with ethics, themselves providing models of ethical progress—a process only partly realized symbolically in Davis' text. In this different way, by seeing fleshed-out characters in Erskine Caldwell's novel *God's Little Acre* and flesh-and-blood people in *Harlan County, U.S.A.* reason ethically and through the direct experience of their moral achievements and ethical failures, the reader's moral imagination is engaged, and she may become finely aware and richly responsible. As was the case with Davis' text, the novel and the film offer a close look not only at the inequalities suffered by workers, but also at the ethics of community in labor communities.

In his essay, "Ripe for Revolution: Ideological Struggle in *God's Little Acre*," Jonathan Dyen claims that Caldwell's novel's purpose is to offer solutions to poor white southerners faced with some of the class issues faced by the family

in the novel. Dyen argues that the novel presents the bourgeois Kantian ethics of the patriarch, Ty Ty, in opposition to the class-conscious radicalism of Ty Ty's son-in-law Will (159). I agree with Dyen that the two characters are presented in opposition to each other; however, I argue that it is different responses to conflicting ethical obligations that better explains the conflict between Ty Ty and Will. Will Thompson leads a community in the mill-town of Scottsville, a group of people who are united against the company that owns the cotton-mill where they labor. Will has two sets of obligations: one to his town, and one to his wife's family. He must decide whether he should stay with the striking mill-workers in the town or leave to join his father-in-law on the family farm digging for gold; thus, Caldwell offers insight into Will's moral imagination as he works through an ethical dilemma. Caldwell guides readers from thought, to talk, to action, thereby offering a model of complete moral engagement.

By contrast, Ty Ty struggles to keep his family together by isolating them on the family farm, searching for gold since wealth will help them rise above their class. Ty Ty expects that Will will join the family on the farm searching for gold. Will, however, remains part of the community of mill workers in Scottsville, struggling against both the mill workers' union and the capitalists who own the mill so that the entire community will have better working and living conditions. At the end of the novel, Ty Ty and his philosophy fail to keep his family intact, but the community of mill workers that Will has united prevails. Through this presentation of the contrasting responses of Ty Ty and Will to conflicting ethical demands, Caldwell's novel brings into focus the problematic relation between

community and family, which can be usefully analyzed with the ethical critical tools developed in my introduction. The ethical failings of the patriarch, Ty Ty, with regards to community on his farm can be contrasted with the ethical achievements of his son-in-law Will in the mill-town of Scottsville. Erskine Caldwell offers readers insight into the moral imaginations of Ty Ty and Will as they reason and act (or do not act) in their labor communities. The reader's moral imagination can thus be engaged to think critically about community and communal reciprocity. The readers, as Davies has noted, "fill in the blanks" (172). I turn now to examine in detail the particulars of the two characters' ethical understanding and behavior.

Will's ethical dilemma is complex, as he is not torn between two individuals or two families. Rather, Will is torn between his family and the much more abstract idea of community. The needs of the community are not as obvious or immediate as the needs of his family, whose members are standing before him asking him for help. Yet, although the community is not present as concrete individuals, Will is nonetheless made aware of its needs through a vision he has, an image that recurs repeatedly in his mind when he thinks about leaving: "tight-lipped women sitting with their backs to cold stoves, and bloody-lipped men spitting their lungs into dust" (70). It is the persistent, ephemeral image, and not a person standing before Will, that represents the needs of the community. Through the image, Will can see that the women have no means to heat their stoves and that the men are sick from the cotton lint in their lungs. Though he is being pressured to leave by his family, the vision is powerful

enough that Will reasons that he cannot abandon the community without feeling himself a traitor: the “mill streets cannot live without him” (70).¹⁰ Though he may profit personally from digging for gold, and though he may fulfill familial obligations by leaving to assist his father-in-law, Will recognizes that community is the more important value and accepts the community’s needs as his own.

Thus the reader sees the complex, individual way that Will goes through the process of realizing the value of community over the personal—indeed that the demands of community may not always be as immediate or obvious as the needs of individuals or their families. The demands may not even be spoken, and yet can be more significant than personal needs. Experiencing a fleshed-out character going through this cognitive ethical process is more affecting than reading a philosophical treatise that describes the value of community—leading the reader to become, in Nussbaum’s phrase, not just aware but “finely aware.” The reader of only the philosophical treatise on community may become aware of the value of community, but the reader who engages with Will’s experience, with all the details and complexities of his relationships and the complicated ideas with which he struggles, becomes finely aware. That is, the reader sees not only *why* to value community, but also *how* to value community.

Recall that, according to the critical model developed in my introduction, to be a moral person, one must do more than think moral thoughts or propositions.

¹⁰ Will also seems to think that Ty Ty is crazy for insisting on continuing to dig for gold that will never be found, but this feeling that Ty Ty is crazy could also stem from Will’s realization that to value community is rational thereby making Ty Ty’s behavior seem irrational or crazy because it is damaging to community.

In addition to being “finely aware,” one must also become what Nussbaum terms “richly responsible” by turning moral thoughts into moral actions. One could be responsible in a narrow sense by doing the minimum required by an abstract moral principle, such as a principle of community. To be “richly responsible,” however, is to fully commit to act in a way attentive to all the particulars of a situation. *God’s Little Acre* is therefore uniquely placed to show how to be “richly responsible” to community, insofar as it shows the moral complexities of a labor strike in all their particularity.

Such rich responsibility exemplified in *God’s Little Acre* through Will’s morality not being restricted to a mere intellectual activity. Having worked through his moral dilemma and reasoned that the needs of community are more significant than personal needs, Will must now act. He could act *responsibly* just by joining the union or supporting the workers from the sidelines. But Caldwell’s character is more *richly* responsible. Even Will’s name is suggestive in this regard: he has not only an idea about what is morally right, but the “will” to act upon it.

The morning he reopens the mill, Will’s moral imagination drives his actions as he again sees the image of his bloody-lipped brothers. He repeats again what he has been telling himself throughout the novel: “They were going to turn the power on that morning. They were going in there and turn it on and if the company tried to shut it off, they were going to—well, God damn it Harry, the power is going to stay turned on” (163). Though Will is shot and killed after the power is turned on, on this ethical critical interpretation it would be incorrect to

see in his violent death only a failure. What happens is essentially a significant moral achievement. Will's goal, repeated again and again, has been to get the power turned on. He has not been concerned with what happens after the power is turned on: his concern has been remaining committed to the demands of community. Will does not seek to reopen the mill with the end result in mind. In fact, he never seems sure of what the end result will be. He just knows that the community needs to see the mill running again. The ethics of community, in Caldwell's text, are therefore not consequentialist. Being "richly responsible" to community means not acting in hopes of what one will get in return, but acting in accordance with what the philosopher G.A Cohen has called a principle of communal reciprocity, the satisfaction of both giving and receiving in a caring way.¹¹

It is not, however, only Will's moral achievements, but also Ty Ty's ethical failings, that provide ethical examples for the reader. In contrast to Will's active, responsible morality, Ty Ty's patriarchal morality is entirely an intellectual activity. Ty Ty claims to care for his family, but consumed by gold fever, motivated only by greed, he destroys the labor community that exists on his farm. Led by Ty Ty, his family members and the sharecroppers that labor on his farm have ravaged

¹¹ As mentioned in the introduction, according to G.A. Cohen, in the market, the only reciprocity that exists, market reciprocity, is motivated by fear and greed because we only serve others for what we can get in return. According to Cohen, however, to truly build community, people must achieve reciprocity through generosity, mutual caring, and virtuosity. This reciprocity called communal reciprocity, means that we are committed to serving our fellow human beings. We have a desire to serve them and be served by them, and there is satisfaction on each side of the transaction (*Why Not Socialism?* 39).

the farm digging for gold. No food is being grown, and only a small portion of the land is being used to grow cotton: “Year by year the areas of cultivated land had diminished as the big holes in the ground increased” (9). Ty Ty insists that his family and sharecroppers stay on the farm, attached to the soil, though they are no longer supported by it. He needs his family and the sharecroppers to remain to assist him in digging for gold, and keeps them there, forced into a market labor community governed by a motivation of greed. Ty Ty is in this regard similar to the mill tourists in *Life in the Iron Mills*, being neither finely aware of the ethical demands of community nor richly responsible to them.

The ethical failings of Ty Ty are further underlined by the fact that throughout *God’s Little Acre*, Ty Ty makes propositions about holding his family—his labor community--together but fails to *act* ethically. Conversations between Will and Ty Ty will reveal much to the reader about Ty Ty’s corrupt moral imagination and ethical failures. Ty Ty’s son-in-law, Will, reminds him: “You ought to be out raising cotton. You can raise more cotton on this land in a year than you can find gold in a life-time” (103). Ty Ty acknowledges that he should have devoted more land to cotton, but only because selling more cotton would mean that he would have more money to dig for gold: “I wish I had spent a little more time on the cotton ... If I had twenty or thirty bales of cotton to tide me over the fall and winter, I could devote all the rest of the time to digging” (103). Ty Ty is reasoning here; his moral imagination is engaged. However, overcome by greed and consumed by gold fever, he will not take action to feed those who labor on his farm: “I’ve got the fever so bad I can’t be bothered about planting

cotton. I'm hell-bent on getting those little gold-nuggets out of the ground" (104). Ty Ty's reasoning, that is, though a form of cognition, does not model the kind of ethical progress made by Will.

Ty Ty's failures of moral imagination at the level of community also infect his personal-level ethical reasonings. Ty Ty brings Griselda with him to Jim Leslie's, and he immediately notices that Jim Leslie is attracted to her. Ty Ty sees this as a way to draw Jim Leslie in, to get the money he needs for gold digging. Instead of discouraging one of his sons from pursuing another of his son's wives, Ty Ty sees the opportunity. He immediately begins to further draw Jim Leslie's attention to Griselda. He tells Jim Leslie to gaze at Griselda: "She's the prettiest girl you can ever hope to see. Just look at her...you know good and well you've never seen a prettier girl...have you son?" (119). Ty Ty continues, more enticing each time, even suggesting that Jim Leslie should see Griselda nude: "Why, man alive! She's got the finest pair of rising beauties a man ever laid eyes on. If you could see them under the cloth, you'd know I'm telling the truth as only God himself could tell it if He could only talk" (119). Ty Ty can see his scheme is working and continues with it, despite Griselda's crying and begging him to stop, essentially prostituting Griselda out to get what he needs. Jim Leslie is murdered by Buck after Ty Ty, in effect, lures Jim Leslie to the farm by teasing him with Griselda, and Buck then leaves with the rifle, presumably to commit suicide. Through this sequence of *personal* moral catastrophes, Caldwell creates an awareness of the effects of greed on a labor *community*: devastation to the labor community on Ty Ty's farm.

Thus, just as the novel does ethical work in helping to see the value of communal reciprocity through the model provided by Will, *God's Little Acre*, in providing an example of the harmful effects of market reciprocity on a labor community, does a second, twin form, a form which, as was discussed in the introduction, goes beyond Nussbaum's idea of literature as moral *exemplar*. The two narratives work together, one providing a model of G.A. Cohen's form of communal reciprocity and the other an example of the devastating effects of the competing market form of reciprocity. And it is the complexity of this work, the way that Caldwell presents the two dilemmas interwoven throughout the novel, that increases its literary value.

Another 20th century text concerned with labor in the South and the issues of community is Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, U.S.A.* In one respect, the documentary film does a similar kind of ethical work to *Life in the Iron Mills* by exposing poor working and living conditions even in a contemporary labor setting. The film chronicles the struggles of a community of coal miners seeking to organize a strike and the community that they maintain. Thus, Kopple's film provides an intriguing text through which ethical criticism can be applied to the representation of a real-world labor problem. First, the documentary film makes viewers aware of the working and living conditions of coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. Second, the documentary film shows that the strength of the workers comes from the community itself and the communal reciprocity the coal miners and other county residents practice, and not in a reliance on the government, the official union, or the coal and power companies. Thus, the film—

a literary text—philosophically can help a reader more fully grasp the importance of G.A. Cohen’s concept of communal reciprocity being successfully realized in a labor community.

The first kind of ethical work *Harlan County, U.S.A.* does is in the way that the film creates awareness of working and living conditions in a county in Kentucky (known as Bloody Harlan for its history of violent labor struggles). The opening scene of the film exposes viewers to the dangerous conditions of the coalmines in Harlan County: a miner shouts into the dark: “Fire in the hole!” repeatedly before plunging down on a detonator. There is a blast followed by smoke and a shout of “All clear” then a shot of men loading themselves onto a conveyor belt to be carried down into the mines. As they enter the dark, narrow space in the mines, they turn on lights on their helmets—the only light in the tunnel and this scene in the film. The mine is dark, damp, and cold, and the camera lingers on the breath coming from their mouths in the frigid air. The cinéma vérité style has the effect of making the scene in the mine authentic for the viewer. With no added light, for instance, only the light from the helmets of the miners, the viewer sees the dark coal mine much as the workers see it. The mine’s ambient sounds are not filtered, so the noises are deafening. The men do not have microphones. The viewer can only see men’s mouths moving, their voices drowned out by the sounds in the mine, again emphasizing continual, enveloping noise. The conditions are cramped; the men often cannot stand in the narrow passageways but are hunched over. The music accompanying the scene further contextualizes the conditions of the mines, referencing that the mines are

a place “[w]here the danger is double and pleasures are few / Where the rain never falls the sun never shines / It’s a dark as a dungeon way down in the mine.” Together, the camerawork, the sound, and the music ensure the viewer experiences the mine as the mineworker does, in all its darkness, loudness, and confinement. The documentary also suggests further hidden danger to the workers. There is immediate danger from explosions, evoked by the chronicling of the Mannington Mine Disaster, a 1968 explosion in which four men died and seventy-eight were trapped. A second explosion meant that the mine had to be sealed with the trapped miners still in it.

In addition to making the viewer aware of the immediate dangers that explosions pose to miners, Kopple also shows the long-term effects of working in coalmines, doing the ethical work, thereby, of creating an awareness in the viewer. Throughout the film, the viewer is introduced to coal miners who discuss the damage done to their bodies by working in the mines. One coal miner’s experience is revealed first through a song about laboring in the mines as he sings and rocks on his porch: “Get on a mighty long time I labored / Down in a deep hole / My bones they did ache me / My knee caps got bad / I got sand in my heart/ Both lungs were broke down from breathin’ that earth.” The lyric about his lungs breaking down refers to black lung, the colloquial term for coal workers’ pneumoconiosis, a debilitating lung disease caused by lung exposure to coal dust. There is ethical value in these simple declarative lyrics. This is the first glimpse the viewer is given of the effects of coal mining on the health of mine

workers, but the film delves deeper by interviewing other workers suffering with black lung, as well as medical professionals.

Another man details his illness, and as he speaks, the viewer hears his gasping for breath and sees his body contracting, struggling to breathe. The man says: "I knowed there's somethin' wrong, but I didn't know what it was. You just couldn't get no breath. You'd walk a little piece and you'd give out—just a-pantin' for breath. And sometimes you couldn't hardly get it no way." The scene cuts to a man sorting coal on a conveyor belt, surrounded by dust. The lighting allows the viewer to see the cloud of dust that the miner is breathing into his lungs, and the scene is further contextualized by the lyrics of the song playing over it: "Black lung, black lung, hold your hands I see coal / As you reach for my life and you torture my soul / Cold as that water hole down in that dark cave / Where I spent my life's blood diggin' my own grave." The scene cuts to a doctor detailing the effects of the disease: "The end result of pneumoconiosis. There isn't anything that you can do to restore the lungs. They're—they're just simply destroyed." So the effects of black lung, though not as immediate, are as fatal to the miners as the explosions. Kopple exposes the viewer to the iniquitous working conditions of coalminers.

What is clear throughout the documentary, however, is that Kopple is not just making the viewer aware of the iniquitous conditions faced by workers, but those of the entire community. Even in the scenes that chronicle the Mannington Mine Disaster, the explosion that resulted in the deaths of over eighty miners, much of the focus is on the women and children the men leave behind. The film

chronicles the effects of low wages and the coal company's callousness on the entire community.

The viewer is also visually introduced—via images of the poor living conditions in the towns in Harlan County—to ethical issues. There are scenes of the towns, the rusted cars and trucks, and the run-down houses built close together with no green spaces. Salon writer Fred Ross visited Harlan County in the same year the documentary was made, and called the scenery “depressingly bleak.” He reported garbage and overturned car bodies along the Clear Fork River filthy with toilet paper clinging to the trees and bushes along it because of the toilets built over it. Ross is told these conditions are typical in counties with low income where mining and power companies own all the property. The companies arrange to pay low taxes, so there is no tax revenue to pay for public services that would maintain the towns. Furthermore, Kopple shows the viewer that miners and their families live in houses with no running water. This is another subtle revelation, not thrust directly at the viewer but revealed in a scene of a woman bathing her child. The girl is fussy and questioning why her mother and father have to go on the picket line. Her mother's reply is: “When they sign the contract, your daddy's gonna have hot running water, and a big ol' bath tub.” Via this exposure of the living conditions, Kopple implicitly suggests a troubling ethical dilemma in the structure of ownership in Harlan County.

Similar to *God's Little Acre*, further ethical work that *Harlan County, U.S.A.* does is in its aiding the viewer to understand the concept of community. Recall that Nussbaum suggests that part of the ethical work that literature can do is to

make ethical inquiry complete by helping people to understand complex ethical dilemmas in ways that analytical philosophy alone cannot. Indeed, *Harlan County, U.S.A.* is uniquely placed to help the viewer understand community, because of the unique role that community plays in Harlan County. In Harlan County, community members are committed to serving each other, providing a model of G.A. Cohen's concept of communal reciprocity. The people of Harlan County have come to realize that they can only rely on each other, and because of this, they all become responsible for each other and treat each other equally, working in solidarity to improve living and working conditions.

The members of the community in Harlan County are finely aware of the importance of relying on each other and not the union or the government. One miner says he has learned an important political lesson in Harlan County: "If you stuck together in solidarity you could defeat them. Besides that, I learned that the politicians worked with the coal companies ... found out that the union officials were working with the coal companies." Thus the viewer can see that this group of people has realized they have only a spontaneous, mutually upheld sense of community on which to rely.

Furthermore, it is apparent that the miners consider themselves equal to each other in a deep sense. The depth of their awareness is revealed as three miners, two white and one African-American, sit together discussing black lung disease, which has affected the entire community. As they discuss the conditions in the mines, solidarity amongst them is highlighted. The men note when they come out of the mines, they are all covered in black coal dust. Race, something

that might have divided them, seems irrelevant. One miner says, “ We’d be covered just black. We done made up of every color when we went in it, but we all looked the same when we came out.” Another man replies, laughing, “Right? We was all brothers.” And then, “That’s right, when you came out the whites looked like the blacks so it wasn’t any different.” The work the men do and their struggle has become an important equalizer, allowing them to see they are part of the same community.

This equality and awareness of equality mean that the community members become richly responsible for each other. The entire community is involved in the strike. The men are not alone on the picket lines but are joined by the women and sometimes even the children of the county. Retired coal miners, their wives, and widows of coal-miners also remain involved. The music of the mining community further reveals and exemplifies the strength of Harlan County’s communal bonds. At a meeting of workers, folk singer Florence Reese, herself the daughter and wife of coal miners, sings about an entire community of men and women uniting to fight against the company: “I’ll see you in the mornin’ out on the picket line/ Which side are you on?/ We’re fighting for a contract / We’re fighting to be free/ And the picket line is a long line / There’s room for you and me.” The community members speak of themselves as a united group, always in terms of what “we” must do. Thus the viewer sees not only the miners, but also the entire community, fight for the contract that will guarantee better wages and safer working conditions.

By the end of Kopple's film, it is clear that community alone is what has helped the workers improve their situation, and, given the community's strength, there is optimism for the future, optimism that is itself an achievement, given that so much of the community members' motivation has been about wanting better for their children. Thus Kopple suggests that though this is a community that has struggled, it has remained a *community* throughout the struggle. Moreover, remaining devoted to caring about each other has improved workers' living and working conditions. In this way, the viewer, in seeing this model of communal reciprocity in adversity, leaves the film with a better understanding of the ethical concept.

Given that one accepts my account of this text's ethical work, one might still question whether that ethical work has any literary value. As in Chapter Two, my claim is that the ethical work that the film does has literary value because of the complex way in which that ethical work is done. Kopple does ethical work not through making proclamations, but by weaving an underlying ethical framework into the film. She does not narrate her text in the familiar documentary style. Kopple never appears on screen to direct the viewer's gaze, to offer instruction or moralize, and only rarely does text appear on the screen to offer guidance to the viewer. Kopple instead lets the miners' notion of community speak for itself, as we have seen through image, word, and song. The viewer must fill in the ethical gaps. Kopple's role is merely to gesture to them.

Kopple's use of music, in particular, adds to the film's ethical dimensions, as she allows the folk music of the community to speak to the moral value of

community. The music continually contextualizes the plight of the workers and the community. Instead of narrating the story, Kopple allows the workers and the music of the community to reveal the underlying ethical work that is done by an affirmation of community as a moral norm and to expose the unethical actions of the government, the coal companies, and the local who fail to fulfill the ethical demands of the community by denying workers better wages, running water, and mine safety. It is all these narrative tools in concert—the music, the lyrics, and the images—and the piecing together the viewer must do to discern the ethical message that adds to the literary value of the film.

IV. “¡TRABAJADORES, VAMANOS!”: COMMUNITIES OF MIGRANT WORKERS

This chapter explores the particular ethical dilemmas faced by communities of migrant workers in the fictional town of Madagascar, Mississippi, in Cynthia Shearer’s novel *The Celestial Jukebox* and Ken Loach’s 2000 film *Bread and Roses*. *The Celestial Jukebox* depicts the labor and class struggles of a multiracial, multiethnic community in Mississippi. *Bread and Roses* presents a fictionalized account of the Los Angeles campaign by Justice for Janitors, which sought to assist custodial workers in Los Angeles who were struggling to secure better working conditions and wages. The Justice for Janitors campaign created a community of custodial workers who were able to gain the support of city leaders and successfully negotiate a contract that guaranteed benefits and raises. Applying my ethical critical framework to *Bread and Roses* and *The Celestial Jukebox* reveals the complexity of the moral dilemmas faced by migrant workers who struggles to balance personal needs and the needs of their (sometimes multiple) communities.

This chapter also raises a new dimension of ethical complexity in labor literature—the interaction of love with other ethical values. As discussed in my introduction, Nussbaum believes that literature provides unique insight into the ethics of love in familial relationships. The ethical criticism of labor literature,

however, complicates Nussbaum's argument. The migrant workers in the works discussed in this chapter find themselves in already difficult ethical dilemmas that are made more complicated by love. Romantic love and love for family both help and hinder migrant farm workers who are struggling to balance the needs of community against romantic and familial love.

In *The Celestial Jukebox*, the shop owner Angus Cheng faces a moral dilemma, struggling in a way similar to Will in *God's Little Acre* between personal needs and the needs of the community. At one level, Angus is *aware* of the needs of his community. Angus, for example, recognizes that migrant workers in the community live in a church with no running water or toilet and are being denied their right to organize in a town where people whisper when they talk about labor unions, if they talk about them at all: "In that isolated part of Mississippi the phrase [labor union] is used quietly, in the same manner one would raise the possibility of a dangerous, contagious disease" (125). Angus faces a difficult moral dilemma as helping the workers, though it may be the ethical thing to do, could jeopardize his business.

Neal Segars seeks to give an account of Cheng's motivational structure in purely emotive, non-ethical terms. In his article "How to Be Chinese in Mississippi: Representation of a Chinese Grocer in Cynthia Shearer's *The Celestial Jukebox*," Segars argues that it is Angus Cheng's emotional commitment to the town, and not the economic advantages he gains, that motivates him to stay in Madagascar. Segars sees this as the novel's attempt to "reverse a stereotype of Chinese in Mississippi as rootless opportunists" (12).

Segars agrees that there is some economic benefit to Angus in serving the community with his grocery store, but argues that Angus' primary motivation for staying in Madagascar is that, as an immigrant who faced discrimination in the south and fled a massacre in his homeland, he feels empathy for the workers in the town. Segars claims the motivation for Angus' dedication to the poor and downtrodden of his community overrides any motivation for economic advancement he might gain by leaving the town.

I agree with Segars that Angus does empathize with the workers and that he does, at least partially, have motivation for staying in Madagascar that is not economic. However, I contend that it is not only empathy that drives Angus to help the community of workers. He is also, importantly, motivated by his love for Consuela. In other words, Angus, like Will, is torn between his own personal needs and the needs of the community. Just as Will is aware of the needs of the workers in Scottsville, Angus is aware of the situation of the workers in Madagascar. In some ways, his love for Consuela helps him develop his understanding of the value of community. He can see, through his close observations of her, that the workers are good, hard-working people, who deserve better living and working conditions. Thus part of his ethical transformation is due to his love for Consuela. However, since this is a transaction that is based, at least formally, on greed—on something Angus can get in return—he remains tied to a market form of reciprocity and not the communal reciprocity that we have seen is required for community to be successfully realized (Cohen 39). Because his motivation is ethically incomplete,

Angus will eventually harm the community.

The reader may at first see Angus as willing to help workers, as he allows Consuela to use his store's window to hang a flyer for her union meeting. On realizing what he thought was trash was in fact Consuela's, he says: "Get you some tape out the drawer and put it in the window about your meeting. Nobody can see it in your pocket" (124). However, it quickly becomes apparent from his conversation with Dean, that Angus was unaware the flyer was for a *union* meeting. Dean says, "I hear you in the labor union business, now," and Angus is clearly confused, replying, "Come again?". Dean persists: "They sayin' your helpin' the Hondurans put a union together." Angus replies, "A what?" as if he has been previously unaware (125). It becomes clear to the reader that Angus did not understand that the flyer, written in Spanish, was advertising a union meeting. Thus, the reader can see that Angus is not yet fully committed to community, especially in the light of Angus' subsequent reasoning that his business will be jeopardized if the people in the town think he is allowing Honduran workers to hold union meetings in his store. Despite any previous empathy for and commitment to the workers, Angus prepares to speak to Consuela, first removing his apron, because "[y]ou couldn't fire somebody wearing an identical apron to the one she would have on" (126). Again, Angus' devotion to the community does not extend to putting himself or his business in jeopardy. In ethical critical terms, he is aware, but not yet fully aware, as he does not see that he may have to make sacrifices in order to fill the ethical demands of community.

As Angus begins to speak to Consuela and sees that she is troubled, he feels a tenderness and does not fire or scold her. The tenderness comes from his love for Consuela, but also because, through his observations of her, he has seen how she and the workers care for each other. Through that unique ethical critical lens, tempered by love, Angus concludes that he has ethical obligations to Consuela and the community of workers. Instead of firing Consuela and distancing himself from the union, Angus commits to community by accepting any trouble the workers may have as a result of unionizing as his *own*; “Might be some trouble coming to you and me,” he tells Consuela (128). Because of his love for Consuela, Angus sees the value in community more fully; his love for her initiates his ethical transformation.

Yet unlike Will in *God’s Little Acre*, Angus is not *finely* aware of the particulars of the situation. Specifically, he does not yet see that his love for Consuela simultaneously hinders, not just helps, his engagement with the ethical demands of community. Consuela is trying to organize the workers to unionize, and Angus’ jealousy leads him to harm her directly and, as a result, the workers. One night, watching Consuela bustle around the shop, preparing for a date, Angus grows sullen, telling her he does not have the money to pay her wages. When Consuela returns to work, it is apparent she has been attacked. Angus calls the farmer, Aubrey, who employs the workers, to tell him Consuela has been assaulted because of her involvement in the workers’ union. Angus is quick to blame the anti-union Aubrey, at least partially, for this incident and for the workers’ treatment. Aubrey is not providing running water or toilets to the workers

in the church where he has them bunk. Aubrey reminds Angus that is also responsible, that he could be providing his own employee, Consuela, a place to live. Faced with Aubrey's accusations, Angus is forced to begin to reason, realizing his own ethical failings with regard to community.

Thus begins Angus' transformation from a person who is aware of the ethical problem of community to a person more finely aware. As he hugs Consuela and feels her bruised body wince at his touch, his thoughts turn with shame to the money he refused to pay her (133). He realizes that Consuela could have protected herself, had she had money with her. In a first attempt to meet the ethical obligations he inchoately discerns, Angus gives her a guitar, bought with money he claimed he did not have to pay her, telling her she can play music in the shop. Yet, from her troubled look, as if he has given her another obligation, it is apparent that Angus has not yet reached a fine enough awareness. Consuela thanks him but adds, "This guitar is good for some people. Is not so good for others," leading Angus to reason that the money could have been better spent on something she and the workers needed: "Absurdity was in the air then. He'd told her he didn't have money to pay her. But he'd spent more than that on a guitar she neither wanted nor needed" (137). Now Angus, forced to pay closer attention to the nuanced particularity of the situation, realizes she needs the money to take care of the workers for whom she is responsible, and that he has harmed a woman and thus the community she exemplifies (137). Angus, now realizing the priority of community needs over individual needs, reasons that if he had wanted to make Consuela happy, he should have put

running water in the old church where the workers were bunking. Here again, as was seen in the discussion of *God's Little Acre*, literature, unlike analytical writing, has a unique ability to do ethical work by showing fleshed-out characters become richly ethically aware.

Like Will, Angus must not only become finely aware, but also richly responsible. Before Consuela is attacked, Angus is simply responsible. He criticizes Aubrey, the farmer who employs the workers, for not providing the workers with a place to sleep. Although Angus is not immediately able to reconcile with Consuela because she leaves town, he still becomes, after the conversation with her analyzed above, a person richly responsible to the community. Working with other members of the community, he improves conditions for the workers. He, Aubrey, and others turn the church into a proper bunkhouse, with bedding, running water, and toilets. Thus, having become finely aware and richly responsible, Angus truly begins to value and build community.

The ethical model Shearer offers in *The Celestial Jukebox* is thus similar to that of Caldwell's *God's Little Acre*, including an important element Nussbaum does not consider in her own ethical criticism—that readers can learn not only from ethical achievements but also from ethical failings. Thus, the process that Angus goes through to realize that he is doing harm to the community, and the corrections he makes, model for the reader a kind of ethical progress not imagined by Nussbaum. Furthermore, *The Celestial Jukebox*, like *God's Little Acre*, provides a model of communal reciprocity. For, after his ethical

transformation, Angus is motivated to act not for his own personal needs, Consuela having left the town, but for the needs of the community.

Again it is crucial to note that the ethical work done by *The Celestial Jukebox* does not lie in proclamations or prescriptions, a prescribed response being impossible in this ethical situation. Rather, the complex way that the novel deals with the ethics of community, the nuanced way that it shows a particular character undergoing an ethical transformation while struggling with balancing personal needs, and its treatment of the variety of complex ways in which an individual can grapple with personal needs and the needs of a community, are what counts as the novel's literary value.

Ken Loach's 2000 film *Bread and Roses* explores another specific and intractable problem faced by migrant workers. Migrant workers in the United States often earn money to send to their communities and families in their home countries. Thus these workers may be torn between two communities: the communities in their home countries and the communities they exist in now. Whereas Will in *God's Little Acre* and Angus in *The Celestial Jukebox* are torn between their own personal needs and the needs of the community, *Bread and Roses* offers insight into the different ethical dilemmas faced by workers who belong to more than one community.

In the film's depiction of the struggle that custodial workers in Los Angeles go through to unionize, viewers see that two of the custodial workers, Rosa and Ruben, resist fully committing to the union. Rosa and Ruben may at first seem to be valuing their own personal needs over the needs of the community of workers.

However, the viewer comes to see that Rosa and Ruben's needs are of a community, just not the community in Los Angeles where they labor. By joining the union and protesting against the company they work for, Rosa and Ruben could responsibly support the community in which they live. However, joining could result in them losing their jobs and their ability to support their communities in their home countries. The actions of Rosa and Ruben, and their resistance to being involved in the union, are therefore not selfish acts. Their actions, their resistance to becoming involved in the union, are couched in their commitment to care for their other communities. Thus the viewer sees the complications of community in migrant workers' lives—that by choosing to work in a union in one community, migrant workers may feel as though they are abandoning another community, perhaps one in which their primary loyalties lie.

Rosa's dilemma is between her family that is with her in Los Angeles and her family she supports in Mexico. Rosa may, at first, seem selfish and consumed and driven by personal needs. When Sam Shapiro, the activist lawyer working for Justice for Janitors, first arrives at Rosa's home, he introduces himself: "I'm Sam Shapiro, from Justice for Janitors campaign." Rosa replies "I'm Rosa, Justice for Rosa campaign." Despite the sarcastic tone of what Rosa says, the exchange establishes her selfishness in the mind of the viewer who might first view her as only campaigning and working for herself.

The same scene, however, offers further insight into Rosa's moral deliberations. First, the viewer can see that Rosa is concerned not solely with her own interests, but also those of her family. The scene reveals that Rosa's

husband has diabetes and that the family cannot afford the test kits or care that he needs. The camera moves around the room, focusing on the faces of each of Rosa's family members and their photographs in the background, photographs of family at home in Mexico--powerful visual symbols of Rosa's nebulous other community beyond the one in which she currently lives and works. Thus, Rosa's campaign is not for her alone, as she claimed when meeting Sam, but for her community. Second, the viewer can see Rosa's distrust of Sam, a function of her doubts that he and she are part of the same community. Rosa chastises Sam for using the pronoun "we" when he talks about what the workers can do to earn better wages and benefits: "We? We? When was the last time you got a cleaning job? You fat union white boys, college kids? What the hell do you know?" In these two ways, the viewer becomes aware of the complication of Rosa's moral dilemma. Rosa cannot commit to the community of workers because she cannot imagine that she and Sam could be part of the same community. Her loyalty is first to her family, whom she must support while her husband is ill, and the family in Mexico to whom she sends money for food and housing.

However, Rosa's engagement with her different communal demands is fluid and shifting. There are moments in the film when the viewer observes Rosa realizing an ethical duty to the community of workers as her sister, Maya, becomes involved in the movement. Maya's involvement allows Rosa to recognize that her two communities intersect and cannot be analytically held apart. Rosa leaves work with some other workers to go to a meeting, even resisting her supervisor Perez's tugs at her arm. At a dance with the workers,

Rosa seems a part of the labor community, laughing and dancing with the workers as they celebrate the campaign's recent victories. However, Loach does not allow this happy intersection of communities to persist. Rosa abandons the custodial workers' campaign when, at the dance, her husband collapses and is hospitalized. Realizing that she must remain committed to caring for husband and that she could lose her job by continuing to work with the union, Rosa betrays the workers by telling Perez which workers are responsible for allowing some unauthorized persons into the building where they work so they can disrupt a party held by the owners, and the workers are fired.

This action may seem, as it does to Maya, a betrayal to the community of workers. "Why? Why?", Maya shouts as she demands to know why Rosa has betrayed the workers. What is revealed in the next scene is that what seems a betrayal to the community of workers, Rosa views as a loyalty to another community. In an emotionally charged scene, Maya and Rosa stand apart from each other. Rosa, framed to appear very tall, perhaps indicative of her moral standing, tells Maya her full history of support of her community in Mexico. When first leaving home, she worked as a prostitute in Tijuana to send money home to Maya and the rest of the family. The viewer thereby sees the intractable way that a migrant worker can be torn between two communities and the sacrifices she is obliged to make. The moral value of Rosa's commitment to her community in Mexico, her feeding and clothing them and giving up her own interests is made manifest. Rosa even tells Maya that she got Maya the job by agreeing to sleep with the supervisor. Rosa has made great sacrifice for community, even if it is not

the community of workers in Los Angeles. The viewer is reminded that though Rosa may not be committed to this community of workers, she has, nevertheless, been committed to her family all along. Thus Loach's text suggests the irresolvable ethical problems of the migrant worker. The migrant worker is kept from fully loving her current community because of her love for her home community. Her love for her family, in this case, comes before her love for community.

Another worker, Ruben, is torn between two communities. As he and Maya watch an older woman being berated and eventually fired by Perez, Ruben turns to Maya and says, "She reminds me of my mother." Ruben can empathize with the workers, but seeing the woman's struggle turns his thoughts to home and his mother. As the film progresses, Loach shows that Ruben is studying to enter law school so that he may better support his family in Mexico. He has been accepted with a scholarship. He needs another \$1,600, money that he will be able to get as long as he can work. It is for this reason that Ruben tells Maya he cannot commit to the workers' campaign, because he cannot afford to lose his job. Again, his loyalty is to his first community, whom he will be better able to support by earning a law degree. Ruben, like Rosa, finds that love complicates his ethical dilemma. Though he loves Maya and the other janitors, he also loves his family and community at home.

Aside from the ethical quandaries discussed above, *Bread and Roses* does provide models of communal reciprocity through workers that do sacrifice and commit to the union. One worker, Berta, loses her job because she will not

tell Perez who is involved in organizing the union. Another, Ben, speaks to the workers about valuing this community as much their home communities, and how doing so will improve working conditions and allow them to have more money to send to their home communities. However, Loach prescribes no response for the viewer. As with other texts examined in this thesis, ethical demands of community, unlike personal demands, strongly resist obvious prescriptive resolution. Community is morally important, but its demands are not clear-cut: there is no one clear, correct ethical choice a person can make when torn between the demands of two communities.

This treatment of complex ethical dilemmas common to *The Celestial Jukebox* and *Bread and Roses* is the locus of their literary value. There is no message that tells the viewer to value community at all cost, for instance, because a prescribed response is, as has been argued earlier, ill-suited to supra-individual ethical scenarios, and impossible in this ethical situation, as seen above. Though there are some workers in the film who are able to commit fully to the Justice For Janitors campaign, they are not presented as acting *more* ethically than Rosa or Ruben. Commitment to the community in Los Angeles is not presented as more important than commitment to home community.

We have seen that *The Celestial Jukebox* and *Bread and Roses* allow audiences to develop their engagement with difficult ethical issues through seeing the particular ethical dilemmas faced by migrant workers in their labor communities. The novel and the film accomplish this kind of ethical work not through prescriptions or proclamations, as might be found in a philosophical

treatise, but through the nuanced way Shearer and Loach present the emotions and struggles of the workers.

V. CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown how a variety of 19th and 20th century labor texts perform a unique kind of ethical work at the supra-individual level, a kind of work not countenanced by earlier ethical criticism. I have also argued that these texts not only deeply engage with ethics and model achievements in ethical understanding, but in providing examples of ethical failings, they demonstrate the variety of ways, some not even considered by ethical critics, in which ethical work can be accomplished by literature. Each of the labor texts in the selection I have evaluated engages the reader's moral and narrative imagination to reveal that commitments to community and communal reciprocity, despite the difficulty of truly upholding them, are a vital element of labor movements.

From this thesis issue two essential implications: a claiming of space for labor literature and a validation of the ethical critical method itself. Evaluating a variety of neglected labor texts using ethical criticism exposes new literary value in labor literature; and the thesis' application of ethical criticism to a wide range of texts, texts of various modalities which differ geographically, historically, temporally, and formally, strengthens ethical criticism's claim to legitimacy as a critical approach.

We have seen that to assess labor literature using only traditional methods is impossible since labor literature often does not have those aspects

that are considered formally or aesthetically valuable. The critical approach I have developed exposes a complexity not otherwise evident in labor texts. Read through this ethical critical prism, previously underexamined texts are revealed to be ethically commendable and, for that reason, of literary value. In so doing, a space for labor literature has been claimed.

In validating the ethical critical approach, I must speak to two other types of critic: the formalist who would discount, or seem to discount, ethical value of literature altogether, and the type of critic who does not frame the work she does as ethical, though her criticism may appear to deal with the apparently ethical issues of racism, homophobia, feminism, or post-colonialism.

First, I shall address the critic who might ignore or seem to ignore, ethics altogether. She is missing an important part of the evaluation of a work. In focusing only on a text's formal aesthetic qualities, the critic will miscalculate literary value. Insisting that a work of labor literature holds no or little literary value because of the simplicity of style or lack of psychological minutiae will mean that the literary evaluation is incomplete. In fact, evaluating any text only on its formal aesthetic qualities may mean that the evaluation is incomplete. I do not mean to suggest a moralizing or censorious view of literature, since I do not call for banning or censorship of texts that display inappropriate ethical attitudes. My approach argues only that a text's ethical value counts *toward* literary merit. It is no part of my argument that ethical merit is the only merit of a text.

The second type of critic I need to address is the critic who disputes that her apparent treatment of ethical issues is properly framed as ethical. To her, I

say, there is a virtue to framing issues as ethical. The arguments of this thesis could have been made, for example, in a Marxist mode—by relying on Classical Marxist premises—but by focusing on labor issues as ethical, the argument carries more universal force. One need only accept basic ethical categories in order to accept the legitimacy of this approach. Insofar as feminists can frame the representation of women in texts as an ethical issue, the appeal of their argument can extend beyond those readers sympathetic to feminist premises. This is not to suggest arguments for feminist premises should not be made but to point out that there exists a neglected critical avenue.

However, this critic might now rejoin with an objection to accepting the critical legitimacy of the ethical categories that I have used. Her claim is that when one presupposes a Western system of ethics, one cannot adequately express, for example, feminist or postcolonial arguments.¹² One response is that to frame the issues as ethical may not be sufficient to completely express the problematic of the female or postcolonial experience, but it can at least partly deepen a reader's cognitive awareness of their milieu. A bolder response is to say that my thesis, in fact, has shown that one marginalized group of people, that is workers, a group that itself compromises women and postcolonial subjects, has been given a voice through the attentive analysis of the ethical issues presented in the labor texts.

¹² For a representative example of this kind of objection, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

I do not insist, then, that we must recognize that we are always doing ethical work when we assess texts. There is, however, an onus on other people to say why they are not doing ethical work, or indeed to prove that they are not, in fact, doing ethical work when assessing texts.

Having answered these challenges to the legitimacy of my approach, this thesis has also given independent positive evidence for the legitimacy of the approach. This thesis has shown that norms of community and communal reciprocity, even when enacted in different ways across geographical and temporal differences, are widely applicable. The applicability and versatility of these ethical norms in a diversity of texts—from the North, South, and Western United States, from early to postindustrial capitalism—vindicating the power of my argument. This gives reason to hope that other ethical norms, for example, equality, liberty, or justice, could be more fully realized through ethical critical interpretations of other genres of literature.

Such examination of labor texts has implications, too, for cross-disciplinary studies. In labor studies, literature could be used to interpret and resist declines in union membership, recent attempts to discredit or dissolve unions, and unions' own failures to see their necessary and intimate links with community. Having scholars who study labor issues to engage with complex ethical dilemmas, not through impersonal matrices but through the depiction of fleshed-out, literary characters engaging with and valuing community, can uniquely enhance labor studies' understanding of ethical issues in labor movements.

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