ORGANIZED LABOR IN TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

General Works


This monograph traces the history of the strike as motif or plot device in American novels, beginning with the earliest manifestations in the antebellum era up to 1945. In six chronologically arranged chapters, Blake examines the way in which strikes in particular, and strikers, organized labor, and workers in general have been treated in popular fiction and in literature over time. Her analysis shows a slow shift in perspective from a primarily negative and uninformed vision through a growing awareness of the realities of working class existence, to the watershed of the Depression years. Blake explores the relationship between the portrayal of strikes and strikers in fiction and the historical record, issues of class and ethnicity, and economic, social, and political climates in the United States, with some attention to issues of gender and race.


This work provides a broad overview of the treatment of working people and organized labor in American literature, covering a period from the early nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. Hapke examines the portrayal of workers and labor organizations and movements in novels, short stories, and selected drama and film in which work, working class characters, or labor issues play an important role. Particular attention is paid to the narratives of marginalized people and organizations. Hapke positions her discussion in the social and political context of each period and explores connections and disjunctions among the authors considered. The extensive bibliography includes critical and historical analyses and primary texts. Hapke is also the author of two other works that explore the changing role of working women as portrayed in American fiction, from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s (*Tales of the working girl: wage-earning women in American literature, 1890-1925*, Twayne, 1992, 192 pp, o.p.) and through the 1930s (*Daughters of the Great Depression: women, work, and fiction in the American 1930s*, University of Georgia Press, 4435 Atlanta Highway, West Dock, Athens, GA 30602, 1995, 286 pp. $18.95).


Originally published in 1956, this is one of the earliest and most influential stud-
ies of communist- or socialist-influenced literature to break from the established consensus of Cold War criticism that uniformly condemned “radical” fiction on both political and aesthetic grounds. Rideout provides a social and political history of novels in which the transformation of society is a dominant theme, from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth. Although textual analysis is not highly emphasized, portrayals of organized labor are inevitably incorporated into the discussion of the many texts dealing with labor themes and events. An extensive bibliography of primary sources is included.


Sloane examines the conflict between individualism and collective action in American society by looking at selected examples in literature, film, and visual art, from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth. He contends that the impetus toward social action is undercut by a deeply held philosophical position placing a high value on the individual, and illustrates his points with examples drawn from a diverse range of creative artists such as Mark Twain, John Dos Passos, Frank Capra, Ralph Fasanella, Harvey Swados, and E. L. Doctorow. Sloane suggests a slow shift over the course of the century toward positive, but problematic representations of collectivity, with the theme of individuality still playing a dominant role in the culture.


Waisala’s dissertation examines literary works pertaining to the labor movement, particularly concentrating on three pivotal events in U. S. labor history: the Haymarket riot, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, and the execution of the activist and organizer Joe Hill. Oral culture is taken into account, as well as the written word, to provide a fuller, richer understanding of the cultural manifestations of the labor movement. Waisala touches on novels by noted authors, but also incorporates discussion of lesser known works, poetry, children’s literature, song, drama, and film. An extensive list of primary sources is included.

The Gastonia Novels


This article examines six novels written about or based on the Gastonia strike of 1929. Cook analyzes the ways in which deeply rooted literary and social traditions are used, resisted, or subverted by the novels’ authors in the service of a social message. Focusing on the treatment of poor white strikers, the text explores the ways in which longstanding literary stereotypes are resisted, and themes of rebellion, sexuality, and religion are used and changed to illuminate economic issues and support a collectivist worldview in the novels. Another overview of the literature of Gastonia is Robert W. Whalen’s “Recollecting the cotton mill wars: proletarian literature of the 1929-1931 Southern textile strikes.” (North Carolina Historical Review, October, 1998, pp. 370-97.)

The thesis of this article is the use by novelists of images of mothers in four narrations of the Gastonia strike story. Schribersdorf analyzes the ways in which maternal figures have been used to represent militant women in the labor movement. The characterization of key female strikers and leaders as mothers is explored in relation to two literary devices: the use of testimony to provide evidence supporting the political message, and the use of mythical or iconic images to create connections between the reader and the ideas expressed. It is suggested that these devices provide a socially acceptable explanation for female militancy. Another article dealing with literary depictions of women strikers is Joseph R. Urgo’s “Proletarian literature and feminism: the Gastonia novels and feminist protest” (Minnesota Review, Spring, 1985, pp. 64-84). Also of interest is Suzanne Sowinska’s “Writing across the color line: White women writers and the ‘Negro Question’ in the Gastonia novels” (In Radical revisions: rereading 1930s culture, edited by Bill Mullen and Sherry Lee Linkon, University of Illinois Press, Hopkins Fulfillment Service, P.O. Box 50370, Baltimore, MD 21211-4370, 1996, pp. 120-43. $20.00). Setting the discussion in the context of the Communist Party’s deliberate and aggressive pursuit of an antiracist policy, Sowinska provides textual analysis of six strike narratives, with particular attention to the intersecting positions of race, gender, and class.

Issues of Race

This article explores the way in which black workers and race relations have been represented in fictional accounts of the labor movement. Noon analyzes depictions of blacks as strikebreakers and as union members in five novels published between 1906 and 1947. These works depict a range of attitudes toward African American workers, but all, in some sense, chronicle the endemic racism that afflicted the labor movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Noon provides an historical context for the discussion of each novel, and analyzes both language and events to reveal the way in which racial tensions undercut worker solidarity and hamper progress toward labor movement goals.


Skinner discusses the relationship between black men and organized labor as portrayed in two early works by Chester Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go and Lonely Crusade. The author shows how Himes’ early life prepared him for a life in literature, and how the experiences of his early adult life contribute to the authenticity of his prose. Himes’ portrayal of the pervasive racism in organized labor is analyzed, as is his treatment of the intricate conflicting loyalties generated by family, class, and race in the context of the strike.

Key Literary Figures

Examined here is the treatment of agricultural strikes and labor organizers in the novel In Dubious Battle. Benson and Loftis explicate the composite nature of
the labor action and the personae of Steinbeck's novel and his use of authentic background and language to create a dark parable of the human condition. By tracing the sources from which Steinbeck drew his portrait of the strike and its organizers and comparing events in the novel to the geographic and historical record, the authors analyze both the intricate craftsmanship of Steinbeck's "realistic" style and the distortion of reality in the service of artistic purpose. Also of interest is Sylvia Jenkins Cook's "Steinbeck, the people, and the Party" ([In Literature at the barricades: the American writer in the 1930's], edited by Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson, University of Alabama Press, Chicago Distribution Center, 11030 South Langley Ave., Chicago, IL 60628, 1982, pp. 82-95, $29.95). Cook traces the transition of Steinbeck's political and philosophical views during the Depression years by examining the treatment of workers, organizers, and collective action in *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.


The portrayal of the I. W. W. in the fiction of B. Traven is the focus of this essay. Little known, but critically acclaimed, Traven is a figure who holds an important place in the literature of labor. Jenkins' primary interest in this article is to refute the idea that the Traven identity encompassed two or more creators. In order to do this, he discusses extensively the portrayal of the Wobblies in Traven's fiction and the means by which 'Traven' might have acquired the knowledge of the I. W. W. organization and culture evidenced in the novels. Jenkins suggests that 'Traven,' an itinerant laborer himself, wrote from first-hand knowledge of the Wobblies, acquired through association, and possibly membership, but that he also made use of published accounts to produce stories and characters that faithfully reflect the I. W. W. perspective. The Wobblies are also the focus of "The Wobbly in American literature," by Alan Calmer ([In Proletarian literature in the United States: an anthology], edited by Granville Hicks et al., International Publishers, 1935, pp. 340-345, o.p.).


Through the lens of social history, the author examines the way in which Erskine Caldwell treats class relations in *God's Little Acre*. Simon provides a biographical sketch of Caldwell to position the text as a reflection of personal experience and political convictions, and then proceeds to analyze the plot as a reflection of the social history of the industrial South. Simon examines Caldwell's portrayal of the striking mill hands and their leader and compares this to the images of poor agricultural laborers to expose intra-class divisions and their negative impact on organized labor in the South.


In this article, the author discusses Ken Kesey's treatment of organized labor in his second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. The union in the novel is set in antagonism to the wildcat loggers of the Pacific Northwest. Tanner suggests that Kesey's negative portrayal of the union derives from a high value for rugged individualism, but also that this attitude relates to the specific historical context of the 1960s, rather than expressing a wholesale bias against organized labor.